

## Chapter 1 from the novella: “Linnea’s Last Day”

I FILL the kettle and plug it in. My aff never had a formal tea service so I dust off the nicest of his mugs, and put them on the wooden tray. Does Louise take sugar? Cream? My hands feel clumsy as I wash the small pitcher. *Darn it!* There’s a chip on one side of the rim, but it’s all I have. I dry it off and fill it with cream. I place the pitcher on the tray next to a small bowl of sugar cubes.

The wooden tray looks plain. Should I cover it with a towel? I grab one from the cupboard, but I can’t bring myself to cover the wood. Hiding the tray would be like hiding Aff. His calloused hands sanded and carved this slab of wood, transforming it into something both useful and beautiful. It was a present for my twelfth birthday.

I sweep the kitchen again, and check to make sure the rubbish bin is empty one more time. My muscles are knotted with nerves. No one has crossed the threshold of this house in eight months. I’ve not let anyone in, and I’ve not gone out. I’m still deciding if the solitude has made me stronger or driven me mad.

It’s almost half past two. Louise is usually on time. I go to the bathroom, and check myself in the mirror for the fourth time in an hour. I smooth my hair and reposition the headband holding all the choppy pieces in place. I shouldn’t have cut my own hair, but I don’t really remember doing it. One night last week, I had made more fresh, red slices in my arm than ever before and was terrified I’d really hurt myself if I kept going, but I needed to keep cutting. So, I guess I attacked my hair instead. Most of the haircut is a blur.

I do remember applying the dye the next day and watching my blonde hair bleed purple. It took me two hours to clean up the mess. There’s still a violet spot on the rug I can’t get out. I try not to let it bother me, but sometimes it’s all I can think about. I should just order a new bath rug online. If only it were that easy to let things go, instead of fussing over them until perfection is achieved. If perfection were possible.

For this meeting, I chose my white, cable-knit sweater, with sleeves I can stretch over my knuckles. Louise doesn’t know my secret, and I plan to keep it that way during today’s visit. I get light-headed thinking of her stepping inside my home, and grip the sides of the sink for support.

“This was your idea,” I tell my reflection.

Louise has never asked to come inside the cottage. She’s always satisfied to complete her well-check through the kitchen window. She leaves groceries and other necessities on the doorstep. After her car leaves the driveway, I crack open the door and collect them. I don’t know if her supervisor knows she’s allowing a

fifteen-year-old, who experienced a major trauma, to live by herself. I don't ask Louise if she is breaking the rules, I'm just grateful to be left alone.

When I return to the kitchen, the orange "ready light" tells me the water in the electric kettle is hot. I pack tea leaves into the infuser, and drop it into the teapot. I fill the pot with hot water, place it on the wooden tray, and bring it to the table. I rearrange things twice, and then move all the parts and pieces back where I had them to begin with. My fingers won't stop twitching.

*Knock, knock.* I jerk, and blood speeds through my veins. Two-thirty. Perfectly on time, just as I anticipated.

"You invited her," I whisper.

But I'm stuck in one spot for several more pounds of my pulse. It's been a long time since she knocked, but she doesn't knock again. I'm sure she's still on my front porch though. Waiting with a heart full of compassion and an armload of patience.

Somewhere, I find the courage to make the long walk to the front door. Just as I expected, Louise has waited for me. Her high Nordic cheekbones, pushed up even higher by a wide smile, make me glad to see her.

"Hi," I say.

"Good afternoon, Linnea," she greets me, but doesn't move any closer. The message is clear: she won't force her way inside.

"How are you?" I ask, standing in the center of the frame. I'm not ready yet.

"I'm well. It's good to see you." She doesn't ask how I am because I've told her not to. I don't want to be asked how I'm doing because the answer is always the same. I'm a disaster. I feel horrible, every minute of every day.

Sweat pools in the small of my back, despite the cool breeze wafting through the doorway. The pressure I'm under comes only from myself. With her hands loose at her sides, Louise is calm as like a sleeping kid. If she expects anything from me, she doesn't show it.

"I need a minute," I squeak, and close the door in her face. I lean against the wall. My breath is fast, and gets faster. There's not enough air in my house. The living room closes in, and feels no bigger than my hall closet.

"Do you need a paper bag?" Louise calls. Her voice smooth and gentle.

This makes me smile. She always brings a paper bag to pass through the kitchen window when I hyperventilate. What am I so afraid of? Louise has proven I'm safe with her.

I pry the door open a few centimeters, and her grin gives me the strength to open it all the way.

I draw a breath up from my toes, and step to the side saying, “please, come in.”

“Thank you,” she says and steps over the threshold, breaking the invisible wall I’ve built.

And the world doesn’t come to an end.

I take her coat, and show her to the table in the corner of the kitchen where Afí and I took all of our meals. He built it, of course, and made the chairs too. Louise places a gift on the table. A bar of chocolate. She shouldn’t have spent so much money on me! I smile, and tell her thank you.

After removing her gloves, she lays her hands in her lap, and sits with the same peace on her shoulders she wore standing on my doorstep. She doesn’t look around and judge my home. Instead, she aims her pretty green eyes down, glancing at me twice as I pour the tea and open a tin of biscuits. I unwrap the chocolate and put it on a plate.

Louise adds two lumps of sugar to her tea. I mirror her also taking two, even though I normally like five cubes. Too much sugar in my tea is my one vice. Well, that and carving up my body.

“Delicious,” she says, when it’s cool enough to sip.

“Thank you. Biscuit?” I offer her the tin.

“Yes, please. You’re a gracious host.”

“Thanks. You are a pleasant guest.”

“Thank you.”

Ten minutes pass before another word is said. We drink our tea, and chew our biscuits and chocolate. The clock ticks louder with the passing of time. The wind kicks up and rattles the window panes. My shoulders wrench up to my ears, and I can’t keep my hands or feet still. I’m ready for this visit to be over.

Louise seems to sense I’m reaching my limit. She stands, and retrieves her coat from the peg by the door. “I am proud of this step you’ve taken today, Linnea. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon. I’ll be back on Friday. All right?”

I nod my head. My eyes are so wide it’s hard to blink. I’m holding my breath.

She slips out the door and I flop in half, exhaling all my anxiety in one blow. I pace back and forth on the old woven rug in the living room, flicking my hands as if I’m shaking water off them.

*I did it!* I let someone inside my house and the ceiling didn’t fall down. But she’ll be back in two days. *Oh no!* Will she expect me to let her in again? I don’t think I’ll be ready to do it again by Friday. It took me four sleepless nights to prepare for today’s tea.

I scramble to the kitchen, and retrieve a wrinkled paper bag from one of the drawers. I sink down and lean against a cabinet door. While breathing into the bag, I picture a sunset over the ocean.

I wake up on the floor with the paper bag still clutched in my hand. It's dark, must be night time. Did I pass out from hyperventilating? No. That wouldn't have put me out for hours. I must have fallen asleep, which is understandable considering how little sleep I've had this week.

I don't have the energy to wash the mugs or put the biscuits and chocolate away. I drag up the stairs to my loft and collapse into bed. Tears flood my eyes and run down my temples into my ridiculous purple hair. The stench of loneliness fills the room. My heart aches. My stomach growls. I close my eyes, but sleep doesn't come.

Rain taps on the window and gutters, hurting my ears. No position is comfortable. Why can't I sleep? I should be able to sleep until Christmas. Maybe I *am* going mad.

Giving up on rest, I clomp down the stairs and light a fire in the stove. I pack Afi's pipe and light that too. I never smoke it; I just like the smell. It makes me calm.

The living room feels like it's shrinking. I pick up my phone to call Louise, she said I could call any time day or night. But she might insist on coming over, and if she does come back now I'll have to let her inside again because of the rain.

Is this how the rest of my life is going to be? Will I forever be terrified to let another human being into my home? I don't need scores of friends and family, but I do want a couple of them. One or two people I can share a meal with, and maybe one I could give my heart to? But the fear inside me locks my doors.

I want to change back to the girl I was before Afi was killed. I want to trust, to laugh, and to love again. I want to stop slicing my skin to leak the pain out.

How is this done? What do I have to do to escape my own mind? I'll do anything, anything it takes, to have a friend and find some peace.

*(Keep reading. Chapter 1 from "Tenderfoot" is on the next page)*

## Chapter 1 from the novel: "Tenderfoot"

PULSE thundering, breath so fast. I sit up and peck my head around. I can't see anything except for a fuzzy glow. I rub my eyes and concentrate on getting them to adjust. The glow sharpens into the flames of a fire. A

tidy bundle of logs burning in a clear fireplace. I can make out white walls, but not much else. There are too many shadows.

I run my hands along the blanket covering me. Is this fur? Where's the quilt my great-grandmother made? I reach out to switch on the light and find a void where my nightstand should be. Where's my furniture? Where's my lamp and book I was reading last night?

My stomach drops. This is not my bed. I don't recognize this room. How did I get here?

Flinging my legs over the side of the bed, heavy feet find the floor and land with a thud. Icy cold stabs my toes. I shove the fur blanket away like it's an attacker and my teeth chatter. A blue door materializes in the grey. Shaking all over, I stand up and take a step.

Spinning, spinning, spinning. My head takes a trip around the room. Weakness unwinds my limbs and I crumple to the floor. I grope for the discarded blanket, but my hands come up empty. I attempt to get back into the bed, but I can't find the strength to hoist myself up. A crawl to the fireplace is even more impossible. I curl into a ball and sleep begins to take me by force.

Hypothermia. I'm going to die.

Light slices the dark. The door has opened. Boots shuffle my way and someone gasps, "Oh no! Linnea, dear!"

I try to speak, but terror has stolen my voice. Unable to remain awake, I drop into oblivion.

Somewhere in the nothingness, I dream. Sitting on the banks of a winding river, I watch the rapids roll by and glisten in the sun. Eagles fly overhead, circling an area of tall grasses on the opposite shore. Furry, rust-colored faces pop in and out of the grass. One of them splits through the green and stops to stare at me. It's a fox. A pup really. I count four of them playing over there.

I turn my face up to enjoy the sun and dark clouds roll in like a curtain closing. Thunder and lightning wreck the sky. The eagles glide lower, landing on boulders and tree stumps over the foxes. With a spread of their wings, a shelter is made. The pups huddle beneath the eagles' cover.

The clouds break and rain pours from them. The river swells, turning foamy and dangerous. But the water continues to glitter like it's still in the sunbeams. I tuck myself away under a nearby tree. Thunder rumbles. A lightning bolt cuts through the air, striking one of the eagles. It screeches and I scream as it crashes into the swiftly moving water.

Heavier and heavier the rain falls, drenching the world in sorrow. Over the roar of the storm, I hear someone crying and taste the salt of my own tears.

“How about some soup, dear?”

I’m in bed, snug and cozy. Lamplight shines from the corner of the room and everything is clear. White walls, blue door, the fire in a transparent hearth.

I’m still here. This wasn’t part of the dream.

A cloaked figure stands in the doorway holding a tray. She swishes into the room and the door whispers shut behind her.

“Your doctor says it’s time to wake you. And feed you, too!” She places the tray on a clear table near the fire

I want to sit up. Am I strong enough to? I raise my head and push up on one elbow. Wow, my arms are really sore. The woman rushes to my side.

“Wait,” she says. Her plump body folds in half like bread dough as she reaches under the bed. A drawer slides opens and clicks shut.

“This will help.”

She produces a jumbo-sized pillow and places it behind my back. It’s soft as a cloud and heated too. I melt into it and smell peppermint candy.

“And . . .” She goes to the foot of the bed and, from another drawer, presents me with a pink, quilted jacket. I slide my arms into the buttery, satin-lined sleeves. She pinches a button on the collar and fluorescent green lines light up along the quilting. Seconds later, the unusual coat is warm. The woman wears a shirt under her wool cloak with the same green lines.

She places a palm to her chest. “I am Maska,” she says with a smile. “You’ll meet my husband, Pularis, later. I want you to know you’re safe with us.” Her voice is as warm as my jacket.

I like this stranger, but I don’t trust her. How can I?

She pats and adjusts my blanket like a mother would tuck in her baby. I edge away. She doesn’t seem to notice.

“Are you ready to eat?” Her cheeks dimple.

“Water?” I croak.

She dips her chin down and looks to the side. Her eyes widen and she looks up. “Oh, you want something to drink!”

What kind of person is confused by the word “water?”

She waddles to the tray, pours something from a pitcher, and comes back holding a mug with two handles.

“Pularis and I are so happy you’re here! And you mustn’t worry. We’ll take care of all your needs while you recover.” She hands me the mug.

Recover? From what? I'm too thirsty to dwell on it right now. I bring the mug to my lips. The first sip is a surprise. It's like water, only sweeter, and tickles the roof of my mouth. I pull the cup back and peer in. The drink is dotted with tiny bluish lights, like the river from my dream. I lock my chin to my chest and frown, waiting for an explanation. But she just nods and nudges the mug back to my mouth.

"Drink, drink dear. You'll need it to recover."

"What is it?"

"It is, well, um . . ."

I lower the cup, and raise my eyebrows in a question to her.

"We call it sana. It's an enhanced liquid."

"Enhanced? Enhanced with what?" My lip trembles.

"My dear, I promise you nothing harmful is in that mug! It's enhanced only with nutrients. We all drink it. Here, I'll show you. May I?" She holds out a chunky hand and I surrender the cup. Maska drinks all of it.

As she tips her head back to finish the last drop, firelight flashes on a stripe of silver in her white hair. It looks like Christmas tinsel. It can't be the holidays. Last I remember, the first snow hadn't fallen yet. Bumps rise on my arms and legs. Anxiety crouches in my chest. I purposely slow my breathing.

"Ah! Refreshing! Do you want a clean mug?" she asks.

"No, that's okay." I nibble on a hangnail.

She pours more of the sweet water from a pitcher and brings it to me. I drink it down in three swallows.

"Can I have more, please?" I ask.

"Sure! And, how about some soup, too?"

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

She brings me another drink, and returns to the tray to get me some soup even though I told her I didn't want any. With Maska's back to me, I dare to look around and search for something in this room that will spark my memory. Anything to remind me how I got here. Give me a hint as to where I am. I see white walls that look like snow. A blue door with an arched top. Clear furniture, constructed from blocks of . . . is that ice? Nothing is familiar. Nothing at all.

"Maska, where am I?" Might as well ask just her.

"You're in my home." Another dimpled grin.

"Are we in Reykjavik?" She shakes her head and her smile fades, but doesn't disappear. My stomach flip-flops. If I'm not in the city, am I still in Iceland? I rack my brain for the last event I can recall. Tea! I had tea with my caseworker.

"Do you work with Louise?" I ask.

Another shake of her head. Good. At least, I'm not in foster care. Louise promised.

"You must be frightened. I promise, you are safe and very welcome here. You've been asleep for a few months. We call it the Deep Sleep. It will take time to recover your strength. Pularis and I are here to help you." She takes my hand and gives it a little squeeze. "It's best we leave it at that for now, dear. We can talk more when your mind is stronger."

Her chubby hand stays on mine. I surprise myself when I don't pull away from her. I have so many questions, but my thoughts do seem a little clunky and slow. Maybe I should wait to hear more. Balancing the bowl on my lap, she hands me a wooden spoon.

"Now, take a bit of soup and then you need to rest."

I reluctantly let go of Maska's hand and take the bowl. Her navy cloak waves from side-to-side as she moves away from my bedside. She settles into frosted white blocks, stacked into a seat with a fur draped over it. Is that thing comfortable?

I ladle soup onto my spoon, blow on it, and test the temperature with my lips. Not too hot. I take a bite. It's more of a broth than a soup and doesn't glimmer like the stuff I drank, but it's good. Rich and salty. However, I meant it when I said I wasn't hungry so I'm slow to drain the bowl.

A clump of stringy hair falls into my face as I eat. I'm startled by how short it is. Did Maska cut my hair? No, I remember chopping it off myself. The purple dye I used after the hack job, still clings to the tips. Wasn't that only a few days ago? Did she say I've been out for *months*?

I steal glances at Maska as she watches the fire. She's small and pudgy in a way that invites a hug. I don't think she'd reach my shoulder if I were to stand. Is she's a Little Person? She looks over to me and lamplight hits her eyes. I gasp and dribble broth on my chin. Her eyes dazzle like sapphires. Those must be colored contacts. She frowns a little, either confused or disapproving of my fascination with her odd features. Embarrassed for staring, I bury my face in the bowl until I'm finished.

After the soup and another two mugs of that sweet drink, I hand the dishes over to my mysterious host. I start to ask questions, but my thoughts have become disjointed and troublesome to organize.

A colossal yawn cracks my bottom lip. I lick it and taste blood. Maska bobbles over and hands me a tin, the size of a plum. She tells me a salve is inside. With pinched brows she wrings her hands and apologizes twice for letting my lips get so dry. What have I done to make her care about me like this?

The comfy bed tempts me to lay down. Maska removes the peppermint pillow and helps me take off my jacket. I hold on tight to the cuffs of my nightgown to secure them over my wrists so she won't see my scars.

"Do you need anything else?" she asks.

"No, thank you." I say, drawing the furry cover to my nose.



She retrieves the tray and starts to leave. Before she reaches the door, my stomach begins to aches like it's empty. I jerk when she snaps the light off and sit back up.

"Maska?" I say.

She stops at the door and turns around.

"Would you stay? Just for a little while." I clutch my blanket in fists at my neck.

"Of course, my dear." She returns the tray to the table and takes a seat in the cubed chair again.

I take slow, measured breaths, trying to downshift into sleep, but it feels like an anxious bobcat is pacing in my ribcage. His snarls and hisses, naming all the fears in my mind. I squeeze my whole face shut and tell the big cat to be quiet. He ignores me, screaming, louder and louder.

My eyes fly open. I can't exhale. I can't inhale either. I jump from the bed and slip on the frigid floor. I recover, yanking the door open before Maska can stop me. Dazed and blinking, I stumble into the next room. I run smack into a set of goggles holding a whizzing chainsaw. A short man jumps back. A grey dog barks. More white walls. Cubes of ice. Where is the exit? I'm so dizzy I don't know which way is up. Blackness is coming for me again. I slip to the floor and my eyes close.

*Where on Earth am I?*

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